

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Southern Minnesota Initiative

Application ID: 14AC156646

Program Name: AmeriCorps LEAP Initiative

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

The applicant's problem area is clearly defined as social emotional learning for pre-school children, and much data supporting the need are provided.

A 2009 survey of kindergarten teachers in the target schools indicated that they would like their incoming students to be socially and emotionally prepared for school.

A 2010 Minnesota School Readiness Survey indicated that over half of kindergartners were unprepared to begin school, with the lowest performing area being social and emotional skills.

About half of the kindergartners entering school in Southern Minnesota come from poverty, which increases their toxic stress, which has been shown to hinder the development of social and emotional skills.

The applicant provided data specifically show the need in Southern Minnesota, the service area, in relation to the problem.

The median income decreased while the number of children living in poverty increased.

The applicant provides supporting evidence that a significant percentage of pre-school children who live in Southern Minnesota are unprepared to learn as they enroll in kindergarten.

The applicant presented a compelling illustration of the effects of "toxic stress" and its effects on preschool students.

The applicant provided timely and authoritative information to expound fully upon the breadth and depth of the problem.

The Minnesota School Readiness Initiative provided solid evidence of need for programming targeted low income

students in improving their readiness for kindergarten.

Local school readiness measures establish that this need is also prevalent in the specific communities chosen for intervention.

The classroom based activities with the preschool children are well-planned and considered. The design of the proposed activities will allow AmeriCorps members to be highly effective in solving the problem.

The applicant clearly lays out the proposed activities that will address the identified need of improving student engagement to reap greater academic success.

In all three quasi-experimental studies, the outcomes presented suggested positive outcomes related to social and emotional learning (SEL) activities and interventions.

The applicant has demonstrated success with their previous efforts to improve the social-emotional skills in pre-schooler by developing and implementing SEL interventions based on sound research and best practices.

The applicant presents a strong case for the use of AmeriCorps members to address the community problem, social and emotional learning deficit preschoolers. The applicant clearly identified how adding additional positions to the classroom to address social and emotional concerns would free up teachers at program sites to better prepare students academically. The applicant clearly describes how Members will use evidenced-based activities, ACSEI and MindUP strategies, to engage and improve student behavior. Moreover, the applicant effectively describes how well trained and supported Members would make a substantial and sustaining impact on Minnesota students and its school system.

The application provides solid evidence of how an additional classroom position can help to minimize disruptive behaviors and improve learning outcomes.

Results cited from previous years establish the effectiveness of this program model on the clients reached.

The applicant presented data supporting the AmeriCorps activities currently in place and which echo the proposed activities in this application.

In the first two years of grant activities, the organization exceeded targets for number of children served.

Each year, almost all students showed gains in social and emotional skills.

The applicant has met or exceeded enrollment goals every year since 2008 and has worked to improve retention rates that eventually resulted in a 20% increase since 2008.

While the applicant had decreases in the total number of students served (Y1-282; Y2-211) as well percentage (Y1-98%; Y2-95%) of students displaying improvement in social emotional school readiness, the applicant effectively described how it had successfully exceeded its targeted goal of assisting 80% of its students in earning gains in social emotional school readiness.

The applicant effectively displayed continuous improvement and responsiveness to Member feedback in adjusting Member responsibilities and duties that directly affect quality of service to students and measurable outcomes.

Gains in past participants on the Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment are impressive and show impact on clients served.

Weaknesses:

The outcomes of the proposed activities do not logically follow the inputs, activities, and outputs. The logic model lists the outcomes, but the narrative does not address them.

The logic model indicates that there are also parent-centered activities, but the narrative does not discuss these activities.

The third activity grouping listed on the logic model did not provide the dosage or duration of the TACSEI and MindUp interventions.

The dosage and duration are not clearly presented in the logic model.

The applicant does not provide sufficient information on the expected impact from the reading and parent involvement portions of the model.

Of the three studies provided, no statistical references were listed indicating the interventions constituted a positive or significant effect on the target population.

Although data were specifically cited for Minnesota and Southern Minnesota, there was no data for the target schools.

The applicant included several references to “studies”, “best practices” or “research shows” without providing any additional information to the quality, credibility, of the study or presented the level of impact/significance, homogeneity to the proposed populations.

One quasi-experimental study cited, the Minnesota School Readiness study, indicated that one-half of those entering kindergarten were less than proficient in key domains of school readiness. However, it is difficult to compare the findings of this study to the current target population as it is not clear how similar the youth in this study were in terms of demographics and need to the proposed target school.

The applicant did not describe how it would gather initial (pre-test) data against which post-test data would be compared to determine effectiveness of services provided.

The relationship between the measured progress (Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment) and school readiness is not fully described, leaving the reader to assume that progress in one will lead to better results in the identified problem.